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AN EXEMPLARY CITIZEN.*

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

IF one were to name Paul Dunbar with Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass and Charles W. Chesnutt, one would have a group of Americans who, even if they were not known to be Afro-Americans (I did not invent the term, I am glad to say; but I am glad to use it, for it serves), would lift themselves far above our undistinguished average, white or black. The fact that they are Afro-Americans is not the chief fact concerning them. It was, indeed, the function of Douglass to be an Afro-American, and that is in a way the function of Mr. Washington. But when one reads what they have written or spoken, one no more feels a quality of Afro-Americanism in them than one feels it in the work of Mr. Dunbar or Mr. Chesnutt, whose function is to be literary artists. Mr. Dunbar is entirely black, and Mr. Chesnutt, to the unskilled eye, is entirely white. Mr. Washington, as Douglass was, is a half-blood. But they are all colored people, and it is only just to credit their mother-race with their uncommon powers and virtues, since, if they were weak or vicious, it must bear the blame and the shame of their shortcoming. So far as I can make out from the study of their minds in their books, they are of one blood with their fathers or forefathers. There is, apparently, no color line in the brain. One almost wishes there were, and that there were a region of thought-life, apart from ours, characterized by something strange, something different, some hint, even, of the ancestral Grand Custom. The ancestral Cakewalk seems to intimate itself for a moment in Mr. Washington's dedication of

* "Up from Slavery: An Autobiography," by Booker T. Washington. Doubleday, Page & Co.

"Frederick Douglass, the Colored Orator," by Frederick May Holland. Funk & Wagnalls Co.

"Frederick Douglass" (Beacon Biographies), by Charles W. Chesnutt. Small, Maynard & Co.

his autobiography to his "wife, *Mrs. Margaret James Washington*," and his "brother, *Mr. John H. Washington*;" but nothing is less characteristic of the author than the cakewalk, and its apparent flourish, in this instance, has a pathos to which, rightly seen, one wishes to uncover. It is part of the proud tenderness, the loving loyalty to family and race, which is one of the finest traits of this remarkable book and of this remarkable man.

I.

Except for the race ignominy and social outlawry to which he was born, the story of Booker T. Washington does not differ so very widely from that of many another eminent American. His origin was not much more obscure, his circumstances not much more squalid, than Abraham Lincoln's, and his impulses and incentives to the making of himself were of much the same source and quality. He was born in slavery, but not in poverty much more abject, more absolute; and he was like another great American of his own color, in those conditions of his birth which forbade him to know his father or even his father's name. They each understood vaguely that he was a white man on a neighboring plantation; but they had never any reason to ascribe to him those gifts or talents which we are fond of attributing to the white half of a mulatto's origin when he shows them. The mother of Douglass died when he was a child. She could do nothing, in that hopeless period of slavery, to fit him for his wonderful career. He remembered her as a tall, straight young woman, handsome and proud, with "deep black, glossy" skin, and features like those of an Egyptian king in a picture he had seen. She was the only person of her color on the plantation who could read; yet Douglass no more learned of his mother to read than Booker Washington, whose mother could not have taught him from her own knowledge, but who was as ambitious for his education as if she could have led or followed him. There is nothing more touching in his book than the passages which record her devotion and her constant endeavor to help him find the way so dark to her. There is nothing more beautiful and uplifting in literature than the tender reverence, the devout honor with which he repays her affection. His birth was a part of slavery, and she was, in his eyes, as blameless for its conditions as if it had all the sanctions. The patience, the fearless frankness, with which he accepts and owns the facts, are

not less than noble; and it is not to their white fathers, but to their black mothers, that such men as Frederick Douglass and Booker Washington justly ascribe what is best in their natures.

II.

The story of his struggle for an education is the story of Booker Washington's life, which I am not going to spoil for the reader by trying to tell it. He has himself told it so simply and charmingly that one could not add to or take from it without marring it. The part of the autobiography which follows the account of his learning to read and write, in the scanty leisure of his hard work in the West Virginia coal mines, and of his desperate adventure in finding his way into Hampton Institute, is, perhaps, more important and more significant, but it has not the fascination of his singularly pleasing personality. It concerns the great problem, which no man has done more than he to solve, of the future of his race, and its reconciliation with the white race, upon conditions which it can master only through at least provisional submission; but it has not the appeal to the less philosophized sympathies which go out to struggle and achievement. It is not such interesting reading, and yet it is all very interesting; and if the prosperity of the author is not so picturesque as his adversity, still it is prosperity well merited, and it is never selfish prosperity.

Booker Washington early divined the secret of happiness as constant activity for the good of others. This was the first thing he learned from the example of the admirable man who became his ideal and his norm: he formed himself, morally at least, upon General Armstrong, and in a measure he studied his manner—his simple and sincere manner—oratorically.

This must be evident to any one who has heard both men speak. It was most apparent to me when I heard Mr. Washington speak at a meeting which had been addressed by several distinguished white speakers. When this marvellous yellow man came upon the platform, and stood for a moment, with his hands in his pockets, and with downcast eyes, and then began to *talk* at his hearers the clearest, soundest sense, he made me forget all those distinguished white speakers, and he made me remember General Armstrong, from whom he had learned that excellent manner. It was somewhat the manner of Salvini, when, in the

character of another colored man, he defends himself to the Venetian Senate for having taken away Brabantio's daughter; and, perhaps, the poet was divining and forecasting the style of the race in the plain, unvarnished reasoning of Othello.

What strikes you, first and last, in Mr. Washington is his constant common sense. He has lived heroic poetry, and he can, therefore, afford to talk simple prose. Simple prose it is, but of sterling worth, and such as it is a pleasure to listen to as long as he chooses to talk. It is interfused with the sweet, brave humor which qualifies his writing, and which enables him, like Dunbar, to place himself outside his race, when he wishes to see it as others see it, and to report its exterior effect from his interior knowledge. To do this may not be proof of the highest civilization, but it is a token of the happiest and usefulest temperament.

III.

The dominant of Mr. Washington's register is *business*; first, last and all the time, the burden of his song is the Tuskegee Industrial Institute. There is other music in him, and no one who reads his story can fail to know its sweetness; but to Tuskegee his heart and soul are unselfishly devoted, and he does not suffer his readers long to forget it. He feels with his whole strength that the hope of his race is in its industrial advancement, and that its education must, above all, tend to that. His people must know how to read and write in order to be better workmen; but good workmen they must be, and they must lead decent, sober, honest lives to the same end. It was the inspiration of this philosophy and experience which enabled him, in his famous speech at the opening of the Atlanta Exposition, to bring the white race into kindlier and wiser relations with the black than they had known before. Social equality he does not ask for or apparently care for; but industrial and economic equality his energies are bent upon achieving, in the common interest of both races. Of all slights and wrongs he is patient, so they do not hinder the negro from working or learning how to work in the best way.

The temper of his mind is conservative, and, oddly enough, that seems to be the temper of the Afro-American mind whenever it comes to its consciousness. The Anglo-American of the South may be, and often has been, an extremist, but the Afro-American,

so far as he has made himself eminent, is not. Perhaps, it is his unfailing sense of humor that saves him from extremism. At any rate, cool patience is not more characteristic of Mr. Washington than of Mr. Dunbar or Mr. Chesnutt or of Frederick Douglass himself. Douglass was essentially militant; he was a fighter from 'way back, from the hour when he conceived the notion that if the slave would always fight the man who attempted to whip him, there would be no whipping, and he did fight his master upon this theory, and beat him; his war with slavery was to the death. Yet he laid himself open to the blame of certain Abolitionists because he would not go all lengths with them, and he refused to take part in the attempt of John Brown, whom he loved with his whole heart. He kept amidst the tumult of his emotion the judicial mind, and he did not lose his head in the stormy career of the agitator.

This calm is apparently characteristic of the best of the race, and in certain aspects it is of the highest and most consoling promise. It enables them to use reason and the nimbler weapons of irony, and saves them from bitterness. By virtue of it Washington, and Dunbar and Chesnutt enjoy the negro's ludicrous side as the white observer enjoys it, and Douglass could see the fun of the zealots whose friend and fellow-fighter he was. The fact is of all sorts of interesting implications; but I will draw from it, for the present, the sole suggestion that the problem of the colored race may be more complex than we have thought it. What if upon some large scale they should be subtler than we have supposed? What if their amiability should veil a sense of *our* absurdities, and there should be in our polite inferiors the potentiality of something like contempt for us? The notion is awful; but we may be sure they will be too kind, too wise, ever to do more than let us guess at the truth, if it is the truth.

IV.

Mr. Washington's experience of our race has been such as to teach him a greater measure of kindness for it than many of his race have cause to feel. His generous enterprise prospers by our bounty, which he owns, with rather more tolerance for the rich than the New Testament expresses. So far from bidding them "go to and howl," he is disposed to deprecate the censure which some of the public prints (perhaps in too literal a discipleship)

neap upon them. With such open hands he believes there must go good hearts, and he finds not excuse only, but justification, for English aristocrats as well as American plutocrats. He does not know but there may be good reasons for the division of society into classes, and for the frank recognition of server and served, as in England. This may be because Mr. Washington's clock does not always strike twelve; and it may be because he and the nobility and gentry are right. In either case, it is interesting in itself and ingenuous in him. It makes assurance doubly sure that the negro is not going to do anything dynamitic to the structure of society. He is going to take it as he finds it, and make the best of his rather poor chances in it. In his heart is no bitterness. If his rights are taken away, he will work quietly on till they are given back. No doubt, it is the wisest way. If he keeps faithfully and quietly at work, he will presently be an owner of the earth and have money in the bank, and from such their rights cannot long be withheld. They can buy the strong arm that robs them; they can invoke the law to make the oppressor get off the land.

Mr. Washington's way seems, at present, the only way for his race, which has not even the unrestricted suffrage to its friend, as white labor has. Perhaps, if it had, it would make no more of it than white labor does. The ballot which was once supposed to

"execute the freeman's will
As lightning does the will of God,"

seems to operate tangentially, and not to carry with it the proof of a direct volition; but so does and does not the lightning, for that matter. What is certain is that Mr. Washington has entire faith in his plan, and that, while he is not insensible or indifferent to the unlawful disabilities of his people, he sees no hope in their making a fight against them, and further alienating the stronger race about them. By precept and by practice he counsels, not a base submission to the Southern whites, but a manly fortitude in bearing the wrongs that cannot now be righted, and a patient faith in the final kindness and ultimate justice of the Anglo-Americans, with whom and by whom the Afro-Americans must live. He has seen the party which freed the slaves unable through forty years of interrupted power to keep them politically free or to make them socially equal with their former masters, and his counsel, enforced by his eminent example, has been for the

Afro-American to forego politics, at least for the present, and to put from him indefinitely the illusive hope of associating with the Anglo-American.

If the Afro-American could only realize the fact that many Anglo-Americans are not worth associating with, it might help him put the vain desire from him. If he would reflect upon the fact, which must be perfectly obvious to him as cook, butler, waiter and coachman, that some of us Anglo-Americans will not associate with other Anglo-Americans, and that if we have "exaggerated incomes" we will not, according to Mr. Depew, admit Anglo-Americans "of distinction in art and letters," to our tables or ball-rooms or coaching parties, he will be still better able to console himself under his deprivation. Probably, he would be willing to consort with even such outcasts from exclusive white society; but, with his native love of splendor, I think he would prefer the exclusive society, and, upon the whole, he might be more fitted for it.

He is as likely to get into it as into any other white society, though I am not sure that he would be shut out from the very lowest, which sometimes embraces even Chinamen. At that level, he would find himself at home in the traditions of poverty, which are much the same, whether it is the poverty of the slave or of the freeman. Mr. Washington remembers, as one of the most significant features of the slave life to which he was born, that his people had no tables or beds where they ate or slept. They never sat down to meals, but caught up a bone or a crust and fed upon it wherever they happened to be. They never went to bed, but dropped down anywhere, and slept upon a heap of rags or the bare floor. But such conditions are not distinctive of slavery. If Mr. Washington were to go slumming, I will undertake that he should see on the East Side in New York very much the same conditions, very much the same usages. I myself have been received (without the express invitation of the hosts; one doesn't stand upon ceremony with such people) in tenements where they seemed to prevail, and I suspect that they prevail in a degree which would astonish the Afro-American sufficiently detached from the past of his race to view it objectively, and to realize the connotative facts.

V.

White men rise from squalor almost as great as that which has left no taint upon the mind and soul of the born thrall, Booker T. Washington. But it must be remembered to his honor, and to his greater glory as a fighter against fate, that they rise in the face of no such odds as he has had to encounter. No prejudice baser than the despite for poverty bars their way. But the negro who makes himself in our conditions, works with limbs manacled and fettered by manifold cruel prepossessions. These prepossessions yield at certain points to amiability, to mildness, to persistent submissiveness, but at other points they yield to nothing.

In spite of them, though never in defiance of them, Booker T. Washington has made himself a public man, second to no other American in importance. He seems to hold in his strong grasp the key to the situation; for if his notion of reconciling the Anglo-American to the Afro-American, by a civilization which shall not seem to threaten the Anglo-American supremacy, is not the key, what is? He imagines for his race a civilization industrial and economical, hoping for the virtues which spring from endeavor and responsibility; and apparently his imagination goes no farther. But a less deeply interested observer might justify himself in hoping for it, from the things it has already accomplished in art and literature, a civilization of high æsthetic qualities.

As for the man himself, whose winning yet manly personality and whose ideal of self-devotion must endear him to every reader of his book, something remains to be said, which may set him in a true perspective and a true relation to another great Afro-American, whose name could not well be kept out of the consideration. Neither by temperament nor by condition had Frederick Douglass the charm which we feel when Booker T. Washington writes or speaks. The time was against him. In that time of storm and stress, the negro leader was, perforce, a fighter. The sea of slavery, from which he had escaped with his bare life, weltered over half the land, and threatened all the new bounds of the Republic. By means of the Fugitive Slave Law, it had, in fact, made itself national, and the bondman was nowhere on American soil safe from recapture and return to his master. Frederick Douglass had to be bought, and his price had to be paid

in dollars by those who felt his priceless value to humanity, before he could be to it all that he was destined to become.

It would have been impossible that the iron which had entered into the man's soul should not show itself in his speech. Yet, his words were strangely free from violence; the violence was in the hatred which the mere thought of a negro defying slavery aroused in its friends. If you read now what he said, you will be surprised at his reasonableness, his moderation. He was not gentle; his life had been ungentle; the logic of his convictions was written in the ineffaceable scars of the whip on his back. Of such a man, you do not expect the smiling good humor with which Booker T. Washington puts the question of his early deprivations and struggles by. The life of Douglass was a far more wonderful life, and when it finds its rightful place in our national history, its greater dynamic importance will be felt.

Each of these two remarkable men wrought and is working fitly and wisely in his time and place. It is not well to forget slavery, and the memory of Frederick Douglass will always serve to remind us of it and of the fight against it. But it is not well to forget that slavery is gone, and that the subjection of the negro race which has followed it does not imply its horrors. The situation which Booker T. Washington deals with so wisely is wholly different from the situation which Douglass confronted, and it is slowly but surely modifying itself. The mild might of his adroit, his subtle statesmanship (in the highest sense it is not less than statesmanship, and involves a more than Philippine problem in our midst), is the only agency to which it can yield. Without affirming his intellectual equality with Douglass, we may doubt whether Douglass would have been able to cope so successfully with the actual conditions, and we may safely recognize in Booker T. Washington an Afro-American of unsurpassed usefulness, and an exemplary citizen.

W. D. HOWELLS.